

2019 State of the State

Mr. Speaker, Mr. President, members of the Legislature and distinguished guests:

I am honored to join you for the start of what I hope to be our **only** legislative session this year. We have spent a lot of time together in these chambers over the past 3 ½ years, but because of our willingness to come together and put the people of Louisiana first, our state is finally moving in the right direction.

Before I begin, I would like to take a moment to speak with you about the recent disturbing fires at four churches across our state. Three of them have been at historically African-American Baptist churches in St. Landry Parish - Mt. Pleasant, St. Mary and Greater Union - and one in Caddo Parish at Vivian United Pentecostal. I've been in contact with the pastors of all four churches, and I have directed the State Fire Marshal to aggressively investigate these tragic fires alongside our local and federal law enforcement partners. I want to especially thank State Fire Marshall Butch Browning for his leadership in this investigation.

Churches are sacred places, and no one should fear for their safety in their house of worship. And no one should be concerned that their house of worship would be destroyed.

Right now, there are more questions than answers, but hopefully the investigation will yield information we can share with the public in short order. Until then, I am asking everyone to please join me and Donna in channeling all frustration, fear and anger into prayer and support for the congregations that have lost their churches.

With that being said...

This is going to be a very different speech than you are used to me delivering the opening day of session because the budget crisis that for years held Louisiana hostage is over. What was once a \$2 billion budget deficit is now a surplus that will lay a foundation for us to continue to move the state forward.

You won't hear me talk about a fiscal cliff.

Funding for higher education is stabilized. TOPS is fully funded. And health care services aren't on the chopping block.

Together, through partnership rather than partisanship, we restored fiscal stability and put an end to the greatest budget crisis in our state's history.

I have said before that there is no challenge too great for us to overcome if we work together in good faith, and we have proven that to be true time and time again.

It wasn't easy. Hard choices and compromises had to be made. But today, I can stand before you and say that the state of Louisiana is much stronger and in a much better place than we were just a few years ago.

And our people agree. LSU's Reilly Center recently released the 2019 Louisiana Survey, which notes that more people think our state is moving in the right direction and fewer think it's going in the wrong one.

Now, there's still lots of work to do, but we are putting this state back on a path to more prosperity, more opportunity.

We just recently announced that personal income in Louisiana is the highest it has ever been. That's more money going directly into the pockets of our workers. At \$252 billion, our GDP is the highest it's ever been. It means that more people are working and our businesses are doing better. It means that the state is producing more than ever before.

And make no mistake – Louisiana IS open for business. In just the past few years, we've landed more than 128 new economic development projects that are resulting in more than 27,000 new jobs, retaining over 21,000 jobs and resulting in over \$33 billion in new capital investment.

This means more people will be going to work for the homegrown companies of Waitr and LHC Group in Lafayette. Up in Monroe, CenturyLink, the only Fortune 200 company headquartered in Louisiana, is extending its commitment to our state through 2025. It means in Baton Rouge, Exxon is investing in a polyolefins plant and that in Shreveport, out-of-state company SuperATV is developing a manufacturing and distribution facility. In New Orleans, it means landing the largest economic development deal in our state's history with DXC Technology, and in Lake Charles, it means that hundreds of folks are working for Citadel Completions at an aircraft center. In Central Louisiana, it means Hunt Forest

Products and its joint-venture partner have opened a state-of-the-art sawmill in LaSalle Parish.

What's the secret to this success? An improving economy and an attractive business climate are essential. But the true key to our economic progress is our workforce. When businesses come to Louisiana, they do so because we have the talent to get the job done. This would not be possible without our renewed commitment to funding our top-notch universities and technical colleges. By partnering with local businesses, they are creating a pipeline of talent that fuels both established industries and new emerging industry.

This is how Louisiana has become a global leader in cybersecurity. I am proud to say that next month, the National Governors Association's summit on cybersecurity will be hosted in Shreveport-Bossier. It's the first time since 1975 that the NGA has brought a meeting to our state.

Representatives from all 50 states will be coming here, to Louisiana along the I-20 corridor, to learn about threats to cyber safety and the cutting-edge technology and the workforce being used to combat it.

Another key to having a truly productive workforce is having a healthy workforce.

We know beyond a shadow of a doubt that Medicaid expansion is saving lives. Because of expansion, about 480,000 low income people now have health insurance. Nearly 65,000 women have received mammograms. 35,000 adults have had colonoscopies. Expansion is also helping with two of our nation's most critical health challenges. 31,000 of our citizens have received treatment for substance abuse. And nearly 100,000 individuals have received mental health services. Expansion has cut the number of uninsured in half. We're generating \$3.5 billion in economic activity every year.

What's more, employment in the healthcare sector is at a record high. While other states that did not expand Medicaid are seeing rural hospitals close, Louisiana has **not** had a single rural hospital shutdown over the past four years. In fact, Louisiana has **led** the nation in the growth of community health centers. For thousands of Louisianans, having access to a hospital or health care facility is the difference between life and death.

Even in our larger cities, access to affordable care is crucial, which is why I prioritized bringing an emergency room back to North Baton Rouge and ensuring that the LSU medical school and University Hospital in Shreveport have been stabilized and strengthened.

True measure of success is not in the dollars we've saved but the lives we've made better.

One of those individuals with a better life is here today. Her name is Elayne English.

For many years Elayne, who is a college graduate, was gainfully employed, until the bottom fell out of the economy in 2009. She was struggling and had to pull money out of her retirement to pay for her \$1000-per month medication.

But Elayne's story doesn't end there. While seeking treatment for substance abuse, Elayne filled out the paperwork for Medicaid. And, under the Medicaid Expansion, she was able to get coverage and get her life back on track. She is working and on her way to becoming a paralegal.

Elayne's story is about second chances and taking responsibility for yourself. It's about getting back up when life knocks you down. She credits a strong support team with helping her to get to where she is today. I am proud of Elayne and I proud that Medicaid could be part of that support team.

Elayne, could you please stand up to be recognized?

Expansion is not the only way we've improved access to care. I want to take a moment to point something out...Session after session, the halls of the Capitol were filled with a sea of yellow t-shirts, symbolizing parents and children whose livelihoods depend on waiver services.

Those yellow T-shirts reminded us that a 10-year wait for services was **not** care. And I want you to know something.

We saw you, we heard you, and we acted to end the waiting list for developmental disability waiver services after 25 long years.

To the parents and advocates, while you may be able to retire your yellow shirts, I know we can still count on you to be here fighting on behalf of citizens living with disabilities and helping us to create a more inclusive Louisiana.

Ending the waiting list is a reminder that the greatest responsibility we have is to care for Louisiana's children, OUR children.

We have taken many steps to ensure the well-being of our most precious natural resource. This is an issue that our First Lady, and my wife Donna, has worked especially hard on, and I am so proud of the difference she is making for children throughout our state.

Working with Secretary of the Department of Children and Family Services Marketa Walters and her committed staff, for the third year in a row, we have broken the record for the number of children adopted out of foster care.

We have revolutionized our approach to foster care through the Quality Parenting Initiative, and we have taken steps to extend the age of foster care to 21 so that young people aren't automatically forced out when they turn 18, like the 150 who aged out last year.

As all of you know, I am strongly committed to protecting human life, but no matter your position on the issue of abortion, we should all be able to agree that reducing the number of abortions in this state is a good thing. I am proud to say that abortions are at a 10 year low in Louisiana.

Also, we've established the toughest laws against human trafficking in the nation and have made huge progress in prevention as well as the way we treat victims.

More law enforcement officers and people in our communities are becoming educated about identifying victims. When they see something they say something, which is exactly what we want to happen. That's what it will take to stop the traffickers and rescue the victims.

Earlier I spoke of what we can accomplish when we come together to achieve a common goal.

From fixing the budget to passing historic criminal justice reform, we have proven that we are at our strongest when we work together regardless of party to put Louisiana first.

The truest example of this, however, came three years ago when Louisiana was hit with not one but two devastating floods. No one can question the resiliency of the people of Louisiana. Our willingness to help one another in times of need is unparalleled.

Another prime example of working together is our securing federal funding for the Comite River Diversion Project, which had been in limbo for 30 years. This would not have been possible without a unified effort from local, state, and federal officials. I especially want to thank our Congressional delegation.

The folks over at CPRA have been hard at work securing funding for other critical projects to help mitigate flooding, restore our coastline, and protect our incredible Sportsman's Paradise. In fact, there will be more investment and more coastal restoration and protection projects underway in 2019 than ever before.

Remember: we did all this in spite of simultaneously resolving the largest budget deficit in the history of the state left by the previous administration.

But we know there's still much work to do.

I imagine many of you share my frustration that fixing the budget impeded our ability to pursue some of the other priorities. So much damage had been done, and we knew it would take years to recover – and in some ways we still are recovering. But now, we have the opportunity to begin making real, lasting change that will positively impact the people we have sworn to serve.

This is our chance to continue moving Louisiana forward.

Now, I know we're not used to hearing the word "surplus" around here very often, but I have checked with economists and it turns out surpluses are actually better than deficits.

Unlike in the past, today, we have the opportunity to put our names on a budget we can all be proud of. All we have to do is recognize the revenue right in front of us. And then we can get to work on making real progress for our state.

For the last year, you have heard me say that giving our teachers a pay raise is my number one priority. This is well deserved and long overdue.

We are all here today in great part because a dedicated teacher believed in each of us. I was blessed to have many amazing teachers growing up. And I certainly wouldn't be standing here today if not for my favorite teacher, who has been by my side for more than 30 years, my wife Donna.

Unfortunately, fewer young people are choosing to go into the teaching profession because they see the underfunded classrooms, lack of appreciation, and stand-still pay. We have teachers preparing our children for the future while struggling to provide for their own.

They are frustrated, and they have every right to be.

Our teachers are so committed to the success of their students that most, 94 percent in fact, are paying out of their own pockets for school supplies.

I want to bring our teacher pay up to speed with other southern regional states **starting** with a \$1,000 pay raise this year. This would be the first step in a multi-year process.

Because our teachers deserve more.

Teachers like Ms. Chantelle Roussel, who has been in the classroom for nearly 20 years. Chantelle recently returned to a school that is no stranger to her, Duplessis Primary in Ascension parish, to be a kindergarten teacher...or so she thought.

Chantelle was asked to fill a position in special education that had been vacant for a month. It's a story we hear much too often these days – teachers having to fill multiple roles due to shortages. Teachers having to work multiple jobs just to make ends meet. But Chantelle stepped up when her school and those students needed her, and now it's time for us to step up for her and for all teachers in this state.

It is also important that we value the efforts of each person working in the school building, from those feeding students in the cafeteria to those ensuring that our classrooms are sanitary. As such, I also support a \$500 raise for school support personnel.

The people who work in our school buildings are just as dedicated as the teachers in our classrooms. A perfect example of that is Patrick Landreth who is a custodian at Mooretown Elementary School in Shreveport. Patrick arrives to work at 4 a.m. every morning. He mows the lawn early so that students won't be distracted by the noise. He keeps the classrooms spotless so that students have a welcoming place they want to come back to every day.

Simply put, he makes educating students possible, and he does so with enthusiasm and with a smile on his face.

Ms. Cathy Braden also works at Mooretown as a paraprofessional while also working to attain her teaching certificate. Her supervisors say that she goes above and beyond to make lesson plans better and brings a wealth of knowledge from her background of teaching early childhood special education. She is an Army veteran, a grandmother, and a caregiver for her mother.

I am proud to say that Chantelle, Patrick, and Cathy are all here with us today. So if you will please stand to be recognized.

Thank you for your dedication to our students.

Make no mistake – the pay goes to the adults, but the investment is in our children.

As with teacher salaries, the state's per-pupil allocation has been neglected for too long. In addition to giving our teachers a pay raise, I am seeking to invest more in the classroom, an increase of 1.375% in the MFP, which would be the second MFP increase in the last ten years.

It goes hand-in-hand with the teacher pay raise, and that's why we included this in our budget proposal.

I am also committed to ensuring all high school students have access to dual enrollment opportunities at our colleges.

Students who participate in dual enrollment are more likely to meet college readiness benchmarks and boast higher college completion rates. It's a chance for students to get real college experience before they get there. And it could even be a chance for Louisiana colleges to have an edge on keeping high-performing students in state after they finish high school.

Dual enrollment is a leg up that should be afforded to any student who qualifies.

Sadly, this is not currently the case.

That is why I support legislation designed to create a statewide framework to ensure all eligible Juniors and Seniors across the state of Louisiana have access to dual enrollment, no matter their zip code and no matter their ability to pay.

We have a long road ahead before we reach true educational equity, but there are smart investments in education we can make today that will accelerate student success. Dual enrollment is one of them.

Our teachers aren't the only ones suffering from inadequate pay.

Every year, I stand here and make the case for why we should increase our minimum wage and pass equal pay legislation. And every year that goes by without action, we are falling further and further behind. I challenge everyone in this room to look at your family's finances and try to imagine making it on \$7.25 an hour. For thousands of Louisianans, that **is** their reality.

While we refuse to act, our neighbors in Arkansas have raised their minimum wage three times, most recently with an \$11 an hour ballot initiative that passed with 68 percent of the vote.

I believe it's time to look outside the walls of this building and let the people of Louisiana decide if raising the minimum wage is the right thing to do.

Therefore, I support a constitutional amendment to provide for a state minimum wage of \$9 per hour effective July 1, 2020. For three years now, I have asked you to support an increase in the minimum wage in this state, and yet, many workers in Louisiana are still no closer to a wage that can support a family or bring them out of poverty.

So I ask you today, even if you have in the past not supported a minimum wage for our workers, give the people of this state a right to decide. I ask you to support this constitutional amendment to let the people of our great state use their voices - and their votes - to determine if we should join the other 44 states that have enacted a minimum wage.

Additionally, Louisiana continues to have the highest gender wage gap in the country. The gap exists in all fields, regardless of profession or educational background, and jobs predominantly filled by women are paid less than jobs mostly filled by men.

As I've said before, there's no point in talking about family values if we aren't actively valuing families.

I am advancing legislation to eliminate pay secrecy by prohibiting employers from taking action against employees for inquiring about, discussing or disclosing their wages or another employee's wages.

Do you really believe someone should be able to be fired for discussing their salary?

This is the right thing to do, and we know it will help close our wage gap.

The health of our people should also be a priority this session.

Medicaid expansion was a huge leap forward in improving health outcomes, but it is far from the finish line.

I am committed to ensuring that every applicant for health insurance in Louisiana is not denied access to coverage because of a pre-existing condition.

We all know the Affordable Care Act is flawed, but we should not have to fight to protect a provision that is overwhelmingly supported by most people in this state and throughout the country.

This is personal for me. I know what it's like being a young, first time parent hearing the doctor tell you that your child will likely face life-long medical challenges. And I know many parents like us would also spend their last penny to see their child get care.

But it shouldn't have to be that way.

There are 850,000 other Louisianans who have found themselves in a similar situation.

When you look at the list of conditions that qualify as “pre-existing,” either you or someone you know has been personally impacted.

I hope as we move forward through this session that there is a very robust discussion about how we can continue to protect those, like my daughter and like so many other family and friends, with pre-existing conditions, and why that coverage is now at risk.

I do not want the nearly one million Louisianans living with pre-existing conditions to get caught in the middle of Washington-style politics. They deserve better than that. Therefore, let’s all work together to find out what really works to maintain coverage for people with pre-existing conditions, while ensuring that insurance costs do not go up.

In 2017, we scored a major victory in the fight against the opioid epidemic by enacting a seven-day prescription limit for opioids, and this year, I propose that we continue to chart a new course in addressing opioid-related harms.

I support legislation to enhance data reporting of fatal and non-fatal drug overdoses where opioids are suspected or present. This will create a mechanism for rapid surveillance of overdoses in the state, which will help better inform us on how to prevent, intervene in and treat opioid addiction. It will allow us to continue to find better ways to fight this problem, which is ripping so many of our families apart.

We are also taking aggressive measures to address Louisiana’s deteriorating rural water infrastructure. Water is something we so often take for granted, and yet it is as essential to life as breathing.

Over half of the water systems in Louisiana are more than 50 years old. The situation is especially critical in rural areas. When water systems fail, emergency actions on the part of the state are required.

When I took office in 2016, the water coming out of faucets in St. Joseph looked like this.

Now, it looks like this. But the town of St. Joseph is not alone in facing challenges with its water system.

Last year, I launched a working group to address the water infrastructure needs of rural communities across the state. Our goal is to bring existing resources together in a coordinated and collaborative effort.

Already, we have secured \$10.8 million in Delta Regional Authority investments, which were leveraged with other public and private dollars to bring in a total of \$131 million for projects in the 56 distressed DRA parishes.

By creating a permanent body, we will be able take a more long-term, robust approach to address these immediate needs.

Last, but certainly not least, let's do more to support Louisiana veterans.

Already, we have expanded the Military Family Assistance Fund, established a Women Veterans Outreach Program, and announced the opening of 30 new veterans centers on higher education campuses across the state. In fact, the veterans center at LSU in Baton Rouge was named best in the nation last year.

We know that our veterans don't stop serving when they come home. They continue to play an integral part in our communities and in our economy. Therefore, I support legislation establishing the Veterans First Business Initiative. This statewide initiative is designed to identify veteran owned businesses in Louisiana, create a veteran owned business designation that they can use, and develop a website for Louisianans to search for various goods or services from veteran owned businesses.

For example, one of the veteran-owned business that would be featured on this website is a Baton Rouge restaurant called BRQ. The co-owner, Justin Ferguson, is an Army veteran who completed two tours in Iraq. Justin makes it a priority to hire other veterans who, like him, face the struggles of returning to civilian life.

Justin is here with us today – Justin, will you please stand?

Thank you for your service to our country. And I want to thank you for supporting other veterans with jobs and training. You represent the best of the spirit of the military, of working hard and of never leaving anyone behind.

And, folks, I've had his food before and he doesn't just know how to lead and inspire, he can cook too.

Here's what I think is so important to remember, we have made tremendous progress in the last three and a half years, not because of one person or one party, but because many people from different parties have come together to make it happen.

We live in a time where it seems like people are becoming ever more divided. We work to one up each other instead of fighting together for a better Louisiana.

But let me tell you. I've learned a lot in my time traveling the state.

I've been fishing off the coast with our fishermen. I've been to National Guard ceremonies to honor our soldiers and airmen as they are deployed all over the world. I've enjoyed a pea cookout with farmers in Bastrop while listening to their concerns about the future of agriculture. I've prayed with families who lost everything in the floods. I've celebrated with new graduates and their proud families from Northwestern State to Delgado and from Grambling to SOWELA.

And no matter where I go across this state, I am more and more convinced that there is far more that unites us than divides us.

Today, I am standing here before you in a room full of people who care about this great state and her amazing people. That breeze of hope I spoke of in 2016 is still blowing. It has gotten us this far, and it can carry us into the future we all want for our children and grandchildren.

I am standing here in a room of Louisianans. I am proud to stand with you. And, together we can continue moving Louisiana in the right direction.

God bless you and God bless the great state of Louisiana.